Think Global Thinkpiece Series

Think Global

Learning for a just and sustainable world

# Writing Culture and Cultures of Writing

In this Thinkpiece, Fulbright Teaching Assistant Lindsey Appell examines what it really means to have mutual cultural exchange.

Reflecting on her experience as an American working in a university in Bucharest, she describes how some of her assumptions about academic life were challenged, and how being open to these challenges, and embracing the unexpected, helped her experience deep cultural change - and a richer international experience as a result.

**December 2015**

**Disclaimer:** *Any views expressed in the following article are not endorsed by the United States Embassy, State Department, or the Fulbright U.S. Student Program.*

Think Global CAN Mezzanine 32-36 Loman Street London SE1 0EH
tel: 020 3751 3000 email: info@think-global.org.uk web: www.think-global.org.uk
Think Global is the trading name for the Development Education Association which is a registered charity (no. 291696) and company limited by guarantee (no. 1737830)

It seems that my most significant adventures abroad have always involved school. I've experienced high school in Japan, been a college student in Wales, and, now, have the opportunity to live the faculty experience in Romania. This comes as no surprise to people who know me well, but it is a little strange to me that I never seriously considered a career in education until well into my undergraduate career. There were lofty dreams of writing novels in a hermitage on the Isle of Skye with my two cats and a small herd of Highland Coos, but I certainly did not start my university education with a passionate desire to teach.

But here I am, post-Masters, in Bucharest on a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship. The ETA is a student program, designed for people just out of their bachelor's or starting their graduate school careers. Unlike, say, a Senior Research Fellowship, student Fulbrighters aren't expected to embark on their programs as authorities in their fields, or even with any experience in their host country. The ideal at work behind the student programs is mutual cultural exchange, where the Fulbrighter ideally learns as much from their host country and institution as their students will learn from them.

And some of the most fascinating things I have learned during my time in Romania have been the striking differences between Romanian and American approaches toward writing as a *discipline*, specifically at the university level, as well as the differences in student attitudes toward higher education.

The Romanian Fulbright Commission notably exclusively places ETAs in university settings. Many ETA programs send their students to a variety of schools, working with a wide range of ages, from small children to high school seniors to graduate students. I spoke recently with an advisor at the Commission, who told me that, due to the quality of English-language education in primary and secondary schools in Romania, the Commission has not felt it necessary to assign ETAs to teach those age groups. Rather, the need is keenest at the university level, where students have large vocabularies and a strong grasp on spoken English, but little to no experience with academic writing in the English language.

This surprised me, coming from a system where writing proficiency exams (the fundamental problems I have with timed writing notwithstanding) and Comp 101 classes are as much an expected part of the college experience as Greek life and annoying petitioners on campus. From discussions with Romanian professors and students alike, I have discovered that writing, creative or academic, is generally not regarded in Romania as a formal discipline which can be taught.

In a way, there is something freeing about a lack of how-to-write-an-essay classes. Allowing students to approach writing without the constrictions of the rhet/comp discipline can produce powerful, creative pieces with unique voices. But it can also utterly paralyze those who, for a variety of reasons, decided long ago that they are simply Not Writers.

Having always had a knack for the written word (not so much the spoken; come to any one of my workshops for exciting examples!), I have never experienced the frustration and misery that struggling with writing can bring. I believed at one point that one was either a writer or not, and there wasn't much for those who were not. In addition to being a terribly ableist attitude belying my lack of awareness of the complexity of identity formation[1], this is simply untrue, as I came to learn through my training with the University of Montana's Writing Center.

I discovered my desire to get involved in education not through teaching workshops with large groups, but through one-on-one peer tutoring with the writing center. My primary project has been to apply my personal approach to writing tutoring, informed by peer tutoring pedagogy, to a larger group of American Studies students (though never more than 20 students per class). Whether this succeeds or not remains to be seen, but so far I have been met with a mix of engaged enthusiasm and senioritis-infused disinterest.

My students sometimes seem genuinely surprised when I ask them for their impressions, opinions, or thoughts. After a particularly frustrating class session in which drawing any sort of response out of students was like pulling teeth, one of the few engaged students approached me to explain.

[1] See studies on "stereotype threat": www.apa.org/research/action/stereotype.aspx

"Don't take it personally," she assured me. "They're used to not being able to speak or ask questions in class, just sit and listen to the professor lecture."

As for low attendance and students coming in as many as thirty minutes late for a small seminar class? "That's just how it is in Romania." She was not apologetic so much as sympathetic, which was humbling. My frustration was due as much to my own lack of understanding, my own particular set of American blinders, as it was to the students' behavior.

I had worried that, being an American teaching English composition to Romanians, the largest barriers I would run into would be those embedded in the language itself. Most Romanians learn British English at the elementary and secondary levels, but aside from the occasional spelling difference, that has had little impact. No, my biggest struggle has been with clashing cultural attitudes toward what is deemed acceptable behavior in college classrooms. Coming from the land of crushing debt and getting one's "money's worth," it seemed utterly incomprehensible to me that students, having made it all the way to their final year at university, could be so seemingly cavalier about their classes. I had encountered students like this in the U.S., of course, but they were rarely the majority, especially as I reached my upper-division classes, and they tended to fall under the umbrella of a certain entitled-yet-aimless-with-rich-parents stereotype.

I certainly do not want to suggest that the inarguably insane price tag for a college education in the U.S. is responsible for "better" or more engaged students. I am an advocate for education for all and the dismantling of all class-, race-, and gender-based barriers to higher education. Nevertheless, I am interested in the ways in which access to free, or at least affordable, education, as well as standard cultural practices in the classroom, can influence some students' attitudes toward their education. Correlation does not equal causation, but accessibility is certainly a piece of the larger puzzle.

Like the U.S., the Romanian educational system consists of public and private institutions of higher education. Unlike the U.S., however, Romania's private institutions are in their infancy, owing to its status as a relatively new post-Communist society. In an inverse of the American perspective, popular attitudes in Romania toward the public vs. private divide have, in the past few decades, favored public institutions as a source of quality education over

private institutions, which, without the infrastructure required for oversight and accreditation, have been seen as degree-factories, existing almost purely for profit. Luminia Nicolescu, in a recent article in *International Higher Education*, notes a shift, however. As the result of an

> external quality monitoring system, through the accreditation process […] levels of quality and social legitimacy have increased, but private higher education still has the image of a profit-oriented sector that offers lower quality education than in the public sector and attracts low ability students. (12-13)

On the other hand, "the private sector improves due mainly to accreditation requirements, while the public sector allows its new economic freedom to claim increased market share at the expense of quality" (13).

What makes my current position interesting is that, while I am working for a well-respected public university, all of my classes are taught in classrooms rented from a private university, due to construction on my host university's buildings. This has given me access to a behind-the-scenes view of these attitudes.

A particular scene comes to mind: a visiting professor had been invited by my department to give a talk, but of course she had to deliver her lecture in the rented rooms at the private university. We entered the room and a collective gasp filled the humid space as we filed in. My glasses steamed up. A faculty member took one step inside and stopped.

"My god," she said, in English, "This is awful."

There was certainly a coffin-like narrowness to the room, and the layout was reminiscent of an old-fashioned elementary school, with a large desk and whiteboard at the front of the room, facing neat rows of wooden tables with attached benches. We moved to a larger empty classroom, with windows that actually opened to the outside, but the set-up was the same.

In addition to the simple frustration of not being able to teach in the facilities they are used to, there was definitely a sense of disdain among the faculty that seemed to go beyond just desks and chairs. And I can't help but suspect it was connected to the larger attitude toward private universities. As someone who strives to de-emphasize power dynamics in the classroom so students can feel

free to contribute to scholarly conversations, I identify with this frustration; it's amazing what a difference something as simple as classroom layout can make.

However, as I am neither faculty nor a student at a private university, I cannot speak to the quality of education at these institutions simply because the classrooms are not what I consider to be ideal. But it is fascinating to see trends in and discussion about privatization of education in a post-Communist country, when I am so used to a very different context for such debates in the U.S. political landscape. Decentering the United States in these sorts of discussions is key to gaining the perspective necessary to make any progress in our own approach to higher education.

It is difficult to move from one culturally-embedded institution to another without a knee-jerk impulse to harshly critique the institution in favor of what is familiar. Culture shock isn't just about food and conversation etiquette. The baggage I bring with me from the American educational system is as much responsible for any frustrating classroom situations as the Romanian system is. But these students are on the verge of entering their professional lives in a globalized world, and I suspect there is something valuable for them in seeing the flustered American fumble about for ways to engage them. They will no doubt encounter similar frustrations as they go on to be parts of the larger global community, and understanding different perspectives on education practices can only help.

So for now, I go to class for those moments when students stand up, hands shaking, to share their latest free-write or other in-class writing activity, and their small, proud smiles when they realize what they can do with language. Moments when students and teacher alike walk away having learned something.

**Works Cited**

Nicolescu, Luminia. "Private versus public in Romania: consequences for the market." *International Higher Education* 39 (2015).

"Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap." *American Psychological Association*. APA.org, 15 July 2006. Web. 24 November 2015.